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Poelzl

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(54) **SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICE WITH
SELF-ALIGNED CONTACT PLUGS**

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H01L 29/10 (2006.01)
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None

See application file for complete search history.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A semiconductor device includes subsurface structures extending from a main surface into a semiconductor portion, each subsurface structure including a gate electrode dielectrically insulated from the semiconductor portion. The semiconductor device further includes alignment plugs in a vertical projection of the subsurface structures, contact spacers extending along sidewalls of the alignment plugs tilted to the main surface, and contact plugs directly adjoining semiconductor mesas between the subsurface structures. The contact plugs are provided between opposing ones of the contact spacers.

3 Claims, 9 Drawing Sheets

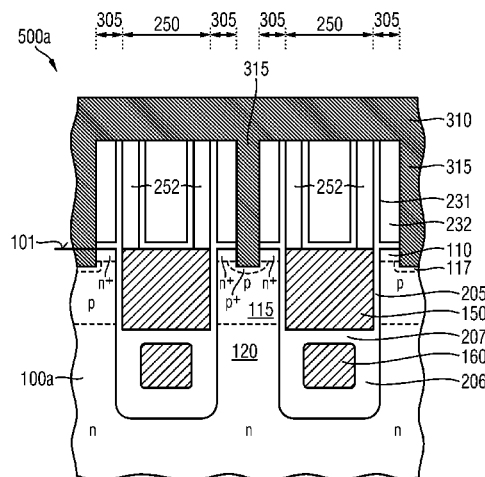


FIG 1A

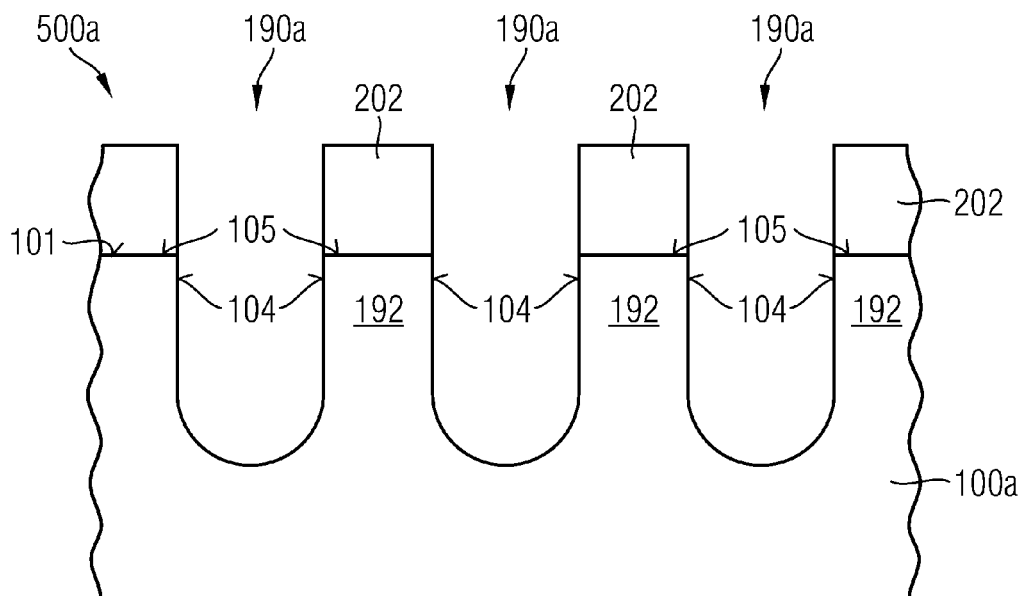


FIG 1B

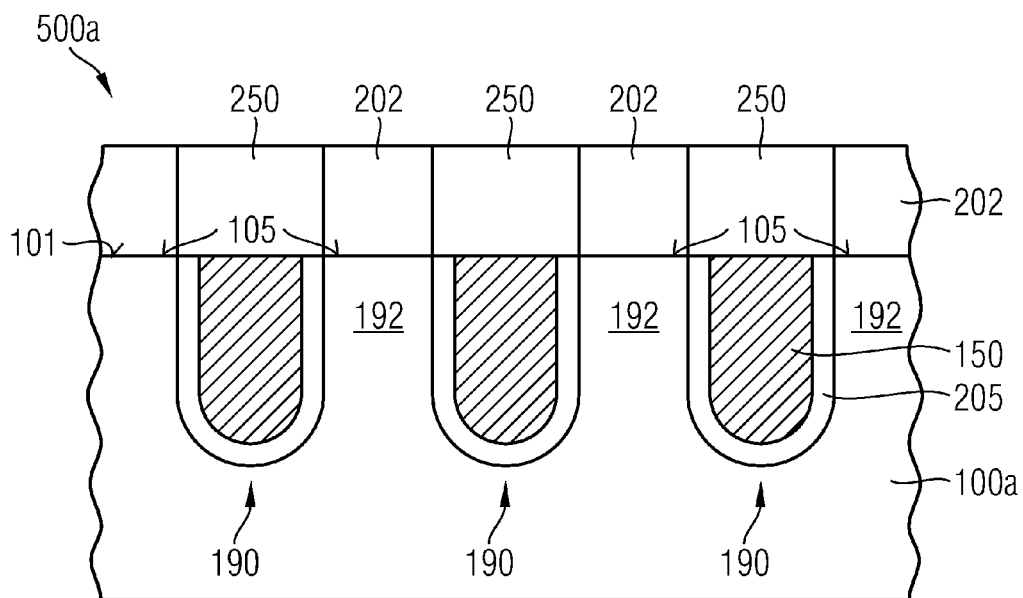


FIG 1C

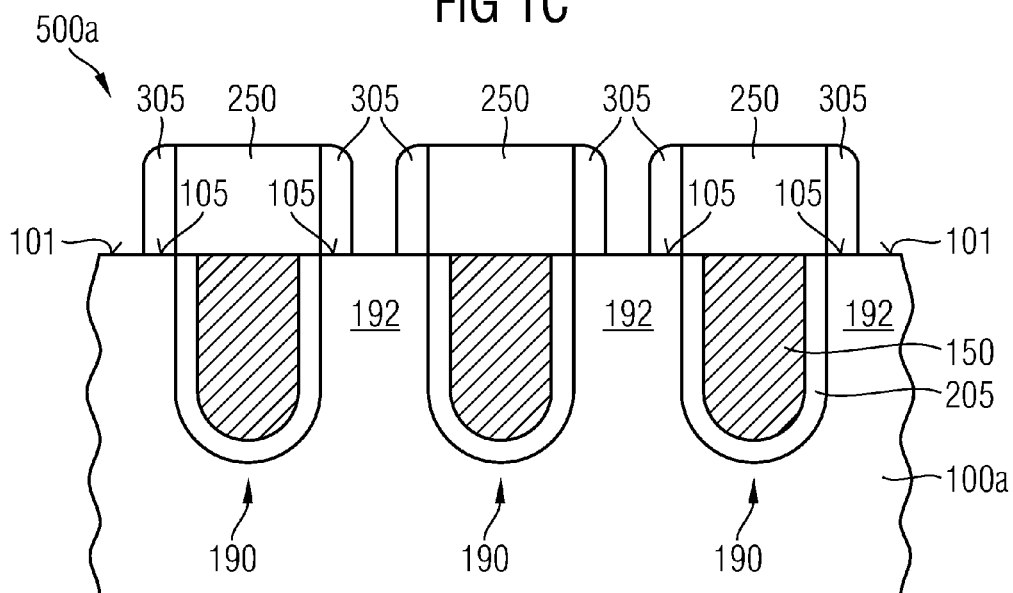


FIG 2

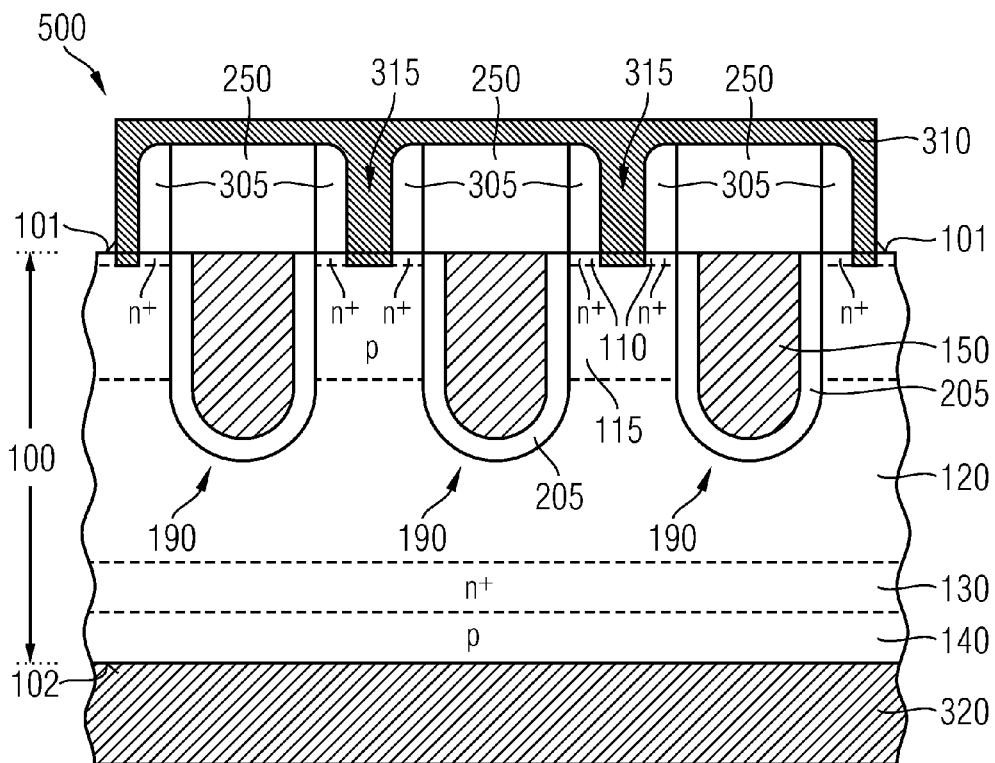


FIG 3A

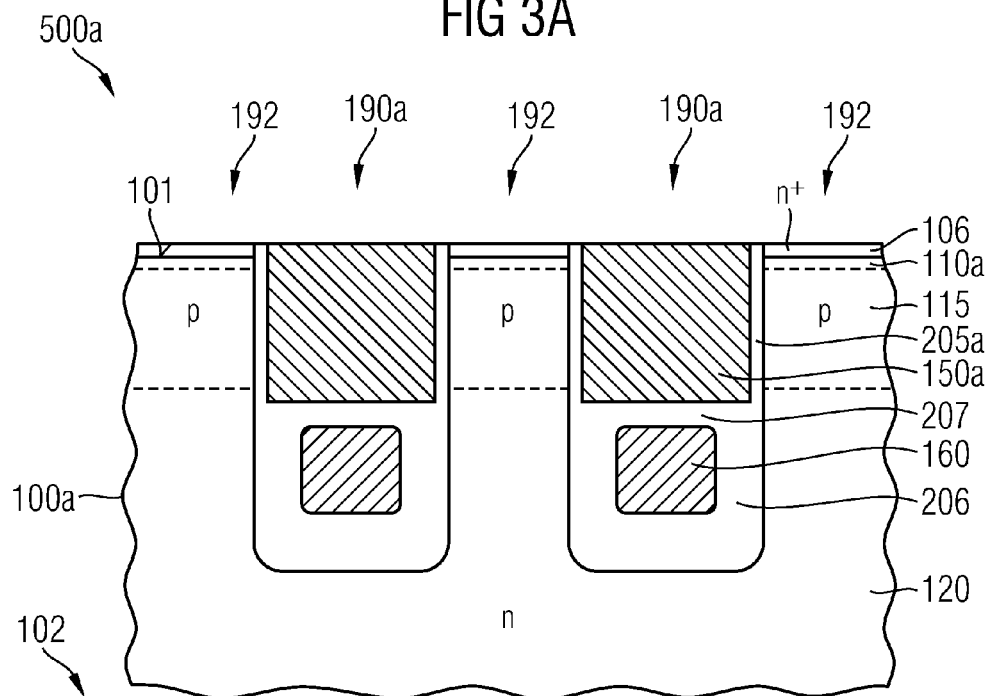


FIG 3B

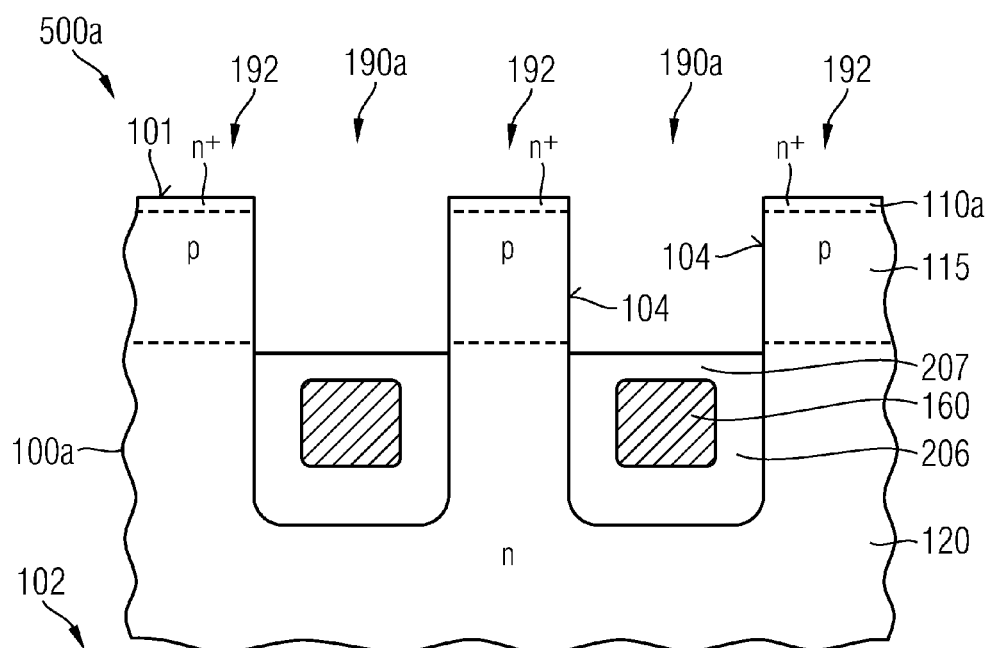


FIG 3C

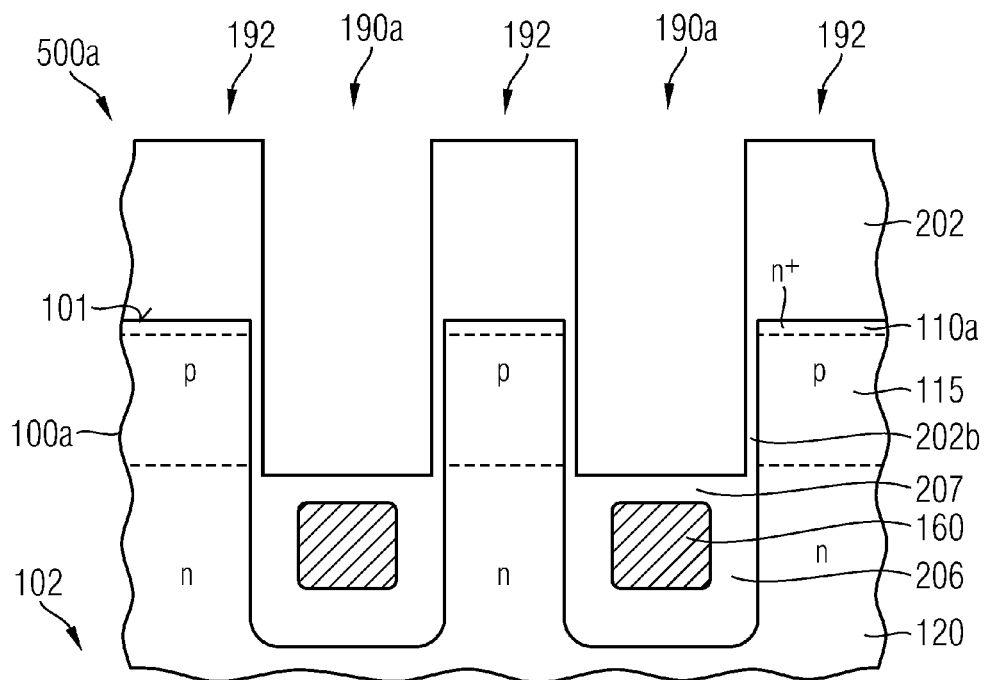


FIG 3D

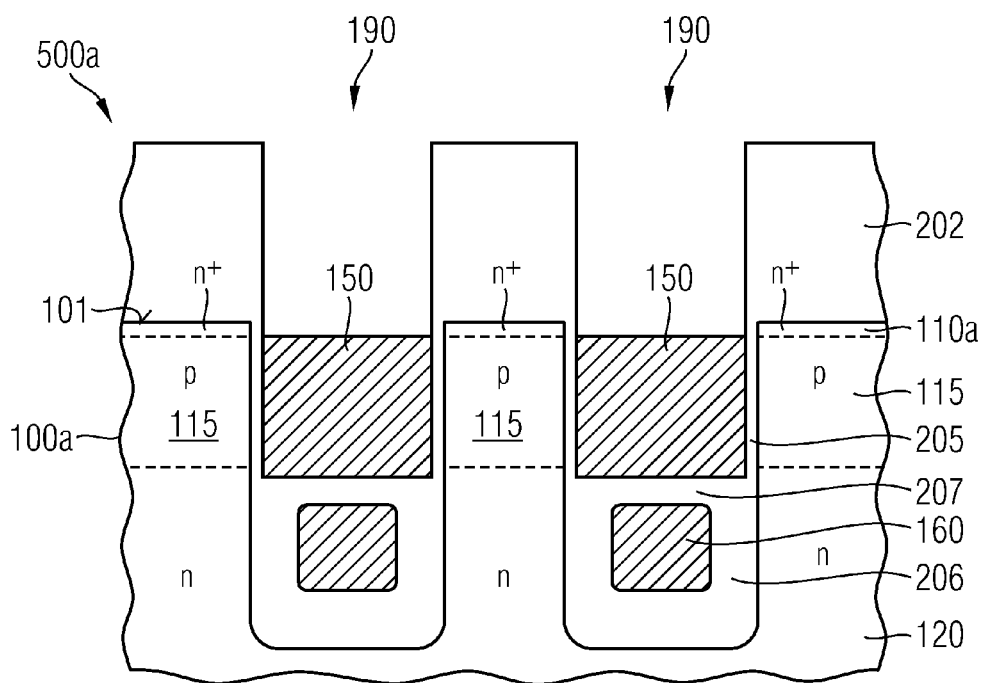
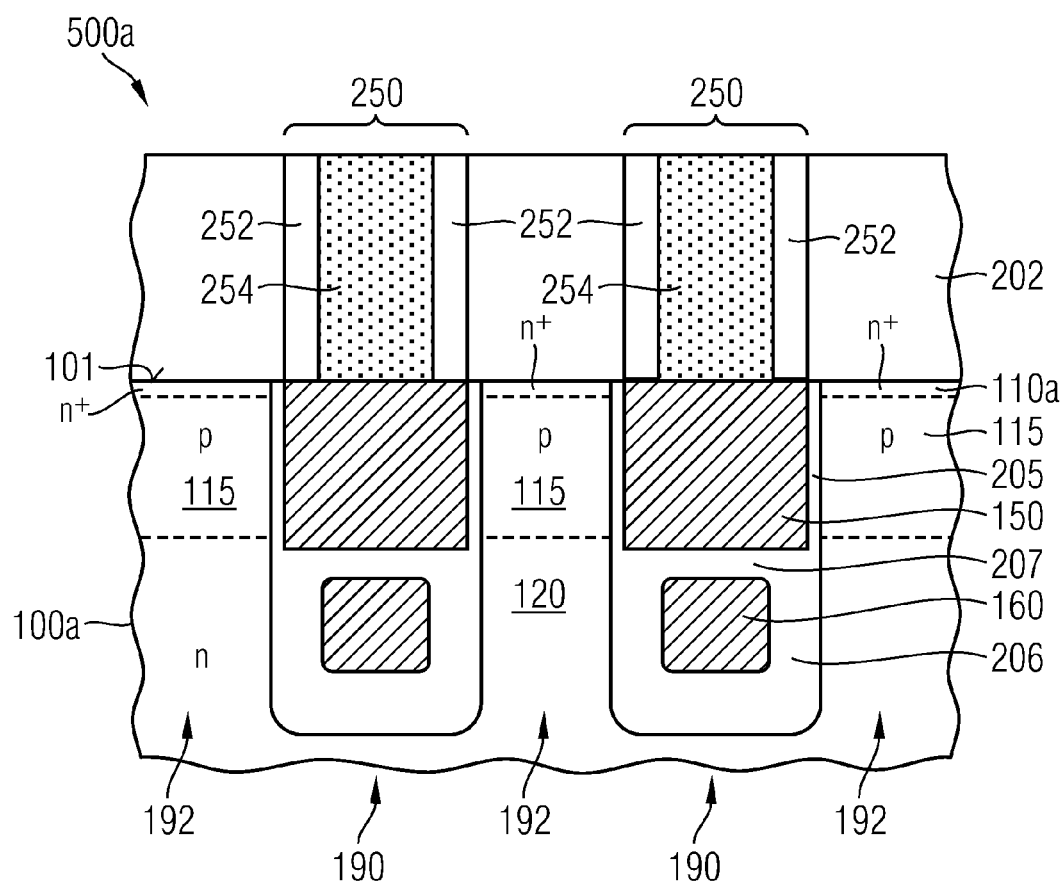


FIG 3E



[illegible]

FIG 3G

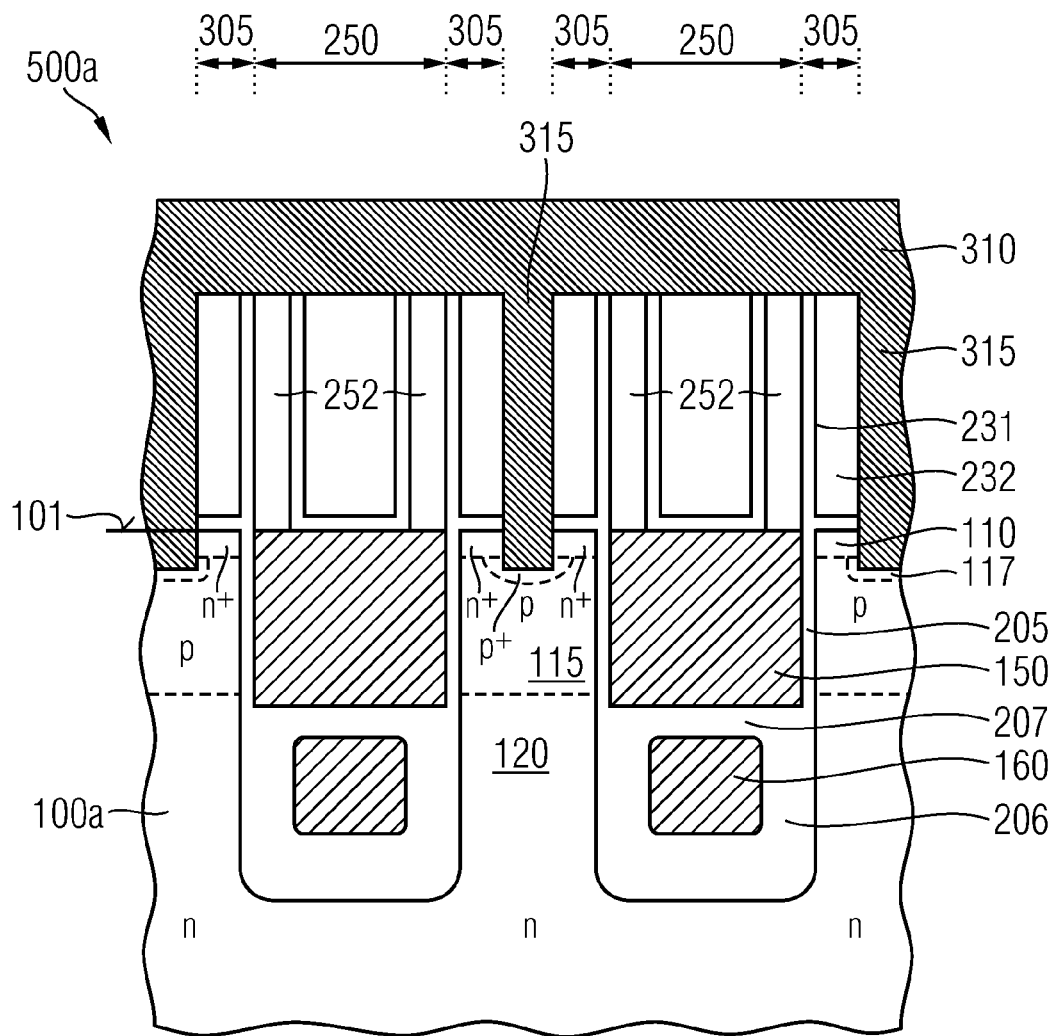
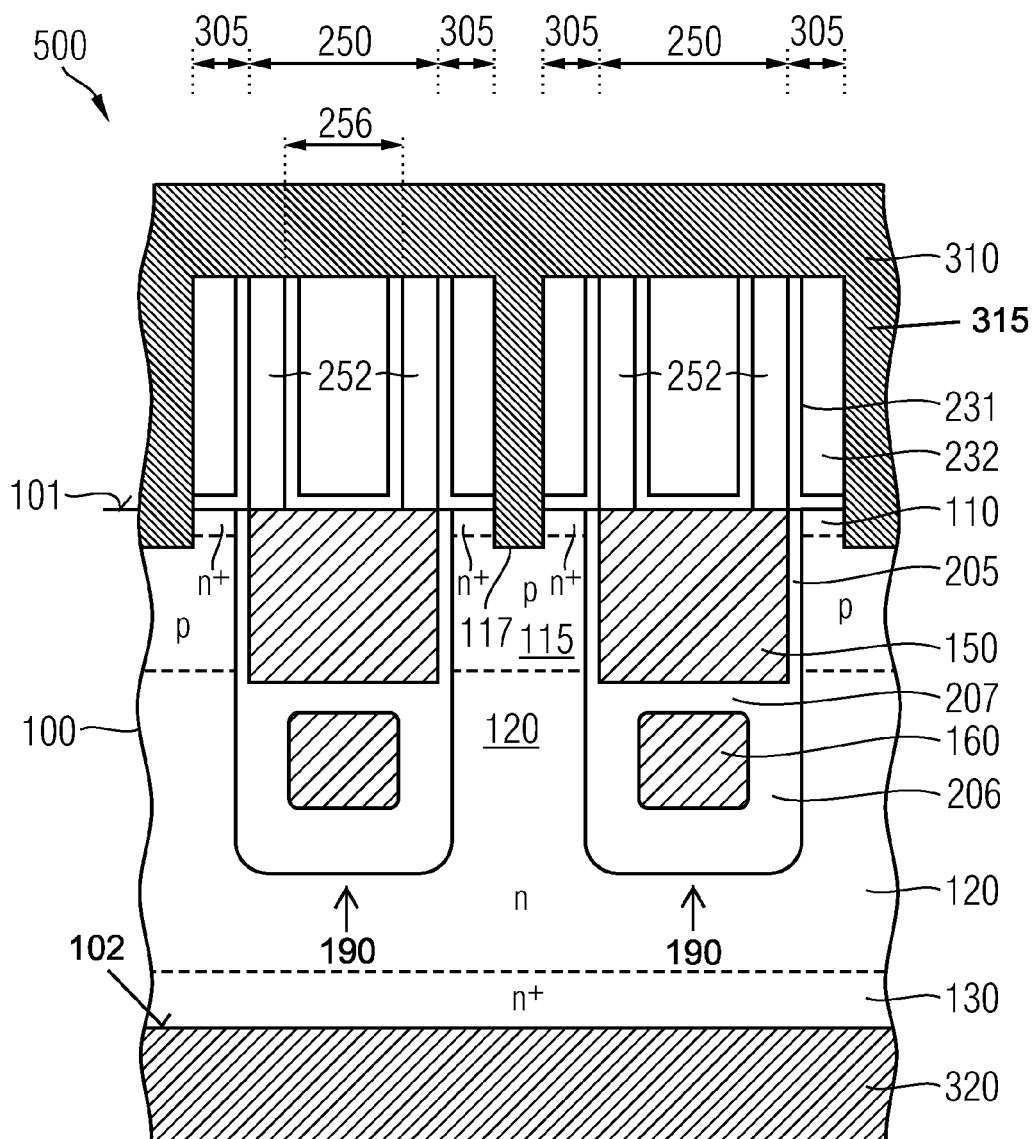


FIG 4A



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SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICE WITH SELF-ALIGNED CONTACT PLUGS

BACKGROUND

Semiconductor devices which are based on IGFET (insulated gate field effect transistor) cells may include subsurface structures including gate electrodes. For providing contacts to impurity zones formed in semiconductor mesas between the subsurface structures a photolithographic mask defining placement and size of contact openings for the contacts is aligned with a photolithographic mask defining placement and size of the subsurface structures. Alignment tolerances between the two photolithographic masks define a minimum distance between neighboring subsurface structures. Approaches replacing the mask lithography for the contact openings by a self-aligned contact regime allow for further reducing the distances between neighboring subsurface structures to exploit carrier confinement effects. It is desirable to provide semiconductor devices with small distances between neighboring subsurface structures in a reliable way.

SUMMARY

An embodiment is related to a method of manufacturing a semiconductor device. Semiconductor oxide pillars are selectively grown on semiconductor mesas between precursor structures that extend from a main surface into a semiconductor substrate. Spaces between the semiconductor oxide pillars are filled with at least one auxiliary material to form alignment plugs in a vertical projection of the precursor structures. The semiconductor oxide pillars are removed selectively against the alignment plugs. Contact spacers are provided along sidewalls of the alignment plugs. Between opposing ones of the contact spacers contact plugs are provided that directly adjoin the semiconductor mesas.

According to another embodiment a semiconductor device includes subsurface structures that extend from a main surface into a semiconductor portion. Each subsurface structure includes a gate electrode that is dielectrically insulated from the semiconductor portion. In a vertical projection of the subsurface structures the semiconductor device includes alignment plugs. Contact spacers extend along sidewalls of the alignment plugs that are tilted to the main surface. Between opposing ones of the contact spacers contact plugs directly adjoin semiconductor mesas inbetween the subsurface structures.

Those skilled in the art will recognize additional features and advantages upon reading the following detailed description and on viewing the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings are included to provide a further understanding of the disclosure and are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification. The drawings illustrate the embodiments of the present disclosure and together with the description serve to explain principles of the disclosure. Other embodiments and intended advantages will be readily appreciated as they become better understood by reference to the following detailed description.

FIG. 1A is a schematic cross-sectional view of a portion of a semiconductor substrate in accordance with an embodiment of a method of manufacturing a semiconductor device after growing semiconductor oxide pillars on semiconductor mesas.

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FIG. 1B is a cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 1A after providing alignment plugs between the semiconductor oxide pillars.

FIG. 10 is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 1B after providing contact spacers along sidewalls of the alignment plugs.

FIG. 2 is a schematic cross-sectional view of a portion of a semiconductor device obtained from the method illustrated in FIGS. 1A to 1C.

FIG. 3A is a schematic cross-sectional view of a portion of a semiconductor substrate during a method of manufacturing a semiconductor device in accordance with an embodiment exploiting growth rate variations induced by impurities after depositing and planarizing an auxiliary material.

FIG. 3B is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3A after removing the auxiliary material.

FIG. 3C is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3B after growing semiconductor oxide pillars.

FIG. 3D is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3C after depositing and recessing a gate electrode material.

FIG. 3E is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3D after providing alignment plugs.

FIG. 3F is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3E after forming contact spacers.

FIG. 3G is a schematic cross-sectional view of the semiconductor substrate portion of FIG. 3F after providing contact plugs.

FIG. 4A is a schematic cross-sectional view of a portion of a semiconductor device in accordance with an embodiment providing self-aligned contact plugs for impurity zones formed in semiconductor mesas.

FIG. 4B is a schematic cross-sectional view of a portion of a semiconductor device in accordance with an embodiment providing contact plugs to buried gate electrodes.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In the following detailed description, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part hereof, and in which are shown by way of illustrations specific embodiments in which the disclosure may be practiced. It is to be understood that other embodiments may be utilized and structural or logical changes may be made without departing from the scope of the present invention. For example, features illustrated or described for one embodiment can be used on or in conjunction with other embodiments to yield yet a further embodiment. It is intended that the present disclosure includes such modifications and variations. The examples are described using specific language which should not be construed as limiting the scope of the appending claims. The drawings are not scaled and are for illustrative purposes only. For clarity, the same elements have been designated by corresponding references in the different drawings if not stated otherwise.

The terms “having”, “containing”, “including”, “comprising” and the like are open and the terms indicate the presence of stated structures, elements or features but not preclude additional elements or features. The articles “a”, “an” and “the” are intended to include the plural as well as the singular, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.

The term “electrically connected” describes a permanent low-ohmic connection between electrically connected ele-

ments, for example a direct contact between the concerned elements or a low-ohmic connection via a metal and/or highly doped semiconductor. The term “electrically coupled” includes that one or more intervening element(s) adapted for signal transmission may be provided between the electrically coupled elements, for example elements that are controllable to temporarily provide a low-ohmic connection in a first state and a high-ohmic electric decoupling in a second state.

The Figures illustrate relative doping concentrations by indicating “-” or “+” next to the doping type “n” or “p”. For example, “n-” means a doping concentration which is lower than the doping concentration of an “n”-doping region while an “n+”-doping region has a higher doping concentration than an “n”-doping region. Doping regions of the same relative doping concentration do not necessarily have the same absolute doping concentration. For example, two different “n”-doping regions may have the same or different absolute doping concentrations.

FIG. 1A shows a semiconductor substrate **500a** consisting of or containing a semiconductor layer **100a** of a single crystalline semiconductor material. The semiconductor substrate **500a** may be a semiconductor wafer or a semiconductor-on-insulator wafer from which a plurality of identical semiconductor dies is obtained, respectively. The single crystalline semiconductor material may be silicon Si, silicon carbide SiC, germanium Ge, a silicon germanium crystal SiGe, gallium nitride GaN or gallium arsenide GaAs, by way of example.

From a main surface **101** one or more precursor structures **190a** extend into the semiconductor layer **100a**. The precursor structures **190a** may be empty trenches, trenches lined with a sidewall structure, partially filled trenches, or completely filled trenches. For example, the precursor structures **190a** may include dielectric structures and/or conductive structures which may be electrically insulated from the semiconductor layer **100a**. Between the precursor structures **190a** end faces **105** of semiconductor mesas **192** form sections of the main surface **101**.

Semiconductor oxide pillars **202** are selectively grown on the end faces **105** of the semiconductor mesas **192**, wherein the growth rate on the end faces **105** exceeds at least 2 times, for example at least 5 times the growth rate in the region of the precursor structures **190a**. According to an embodiment, the growth rate on the end faces **105** is at least 10 times the growth rate on exposed sidewall surfaces **104** of the semiconductor mesas **192**.

The selectivity of the growth process may be obtained by exposing the sidewall surfaces **104** of the semiconductor mesas **192** and using an epitaxial growth process exploiting different growth rates on different crystallographic orientations.

According to another embodiment the main surface **101** or the exposed sidewall surfaces **104** are treated in a way that changes the oxide growth rate on the respective surface. For example, a stop mask may be provided that exposes the end faces **105** and that covers at least the sidewall surfaces **104** or the complete trench surface of the precursor structures **190a**. For example, a stop layer thinner than half of the width of the precursor structures **190a** is deposited or grown to line both the trenches and the end faces **105**. A sacrificial material is deposited that fills the trenches. The sacrificial material is recessed to expose the portions of the stop layer on the end faces **105** while still filling the trenches. Exposed portions of the stop layer are removed using the remnants of the sacrificial material in the trenches as an etch mask. Then the remnants of the sacrificial material may be removed. Other embodiments may provide a spacer etch of the stop layer. The

material of the stop layer is selected to locally reduce or suppress the growth of the semiconductor oxide, for example silicon nitride.

Another embodiment may provide a supplementary material filling at least upper sections of the precursor structures **190a**, wherein the supplementary material may be inert in an ambient providing a semiconductor oxide growth on the semiconductor mesas **192**, or wherein a reaction product of the supplementary material resulting at the conditions for a subsequent oxide growth on the semiconductor mesas **192** is selectively removable against the grown semiconductor oxide and the semiconductor material of the semiconductor layer **100a**.

According to a further embodiment the precursor structures **190a** are filled with a sacrificial material with a surface flush with the main surface **101** and the end faces **105**. Impurities are introduced into the main surface **101** to form implant zones directly adjoining the end faces **105** of the semiconductor mesas **192**. After formation of the implant zones, at least portions of the sidewall surfaces **104** oriented to the main surface **101** are exposed. An oxidation process is controlled, exploiting that the growth rate of semiconductor oxide depends on the impurity concentration in the underlying semiconductor substrate.

FIG. 1A shows the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** grown on the end faces **105** of the semiconductor mesas **192** between the precursor structures **190a**. Further materials may be deposited to obtain finalized subsurface structures **190** on the basis of the precursor structures **190a** of FIG. 1A. The subsurface structures **190** may include one or more dielectric structures and/or one or more conductive structure dielectrically insulated from the semiconductor portion **100**. For example, the subsurface structures **190** include one single conductive structure, e.g. a gate electrode of an IGFET cell of a power switching device, e.g. an IGFET or IGBT (insulated gate bipolar transistor), or a cell of a JFET (junction field effect transistor) by way of example. According to other embodiments, the subsurface structures **190** include a second conductive structure dielectrically insulated from the other, for example a field electrode. A first edge of the subsurface structures **190** may be flush with the end faces **105** of the semiconductor mesas **192**.

Spaces between the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** above the subsurface structures **190** may be filled with one or more auxiliary materials, for example by depositing the auxiliary materials and removing portions of the auxiliary materials above the semiconductor oxide pillars **202**.

FIG. 1B shows the subsurface structures **190** including a gate electrode **150** provided from a conductive material, e.g. heavily doped polycrystalline silicon (polysilicon) and a dielectric layer **205** dielectrically insulating the gate electrode **150** from the semiconductor layer **100a**. In the vertical projection of the subsurface structures **190** are alignment plugs **250**, whereby a vertical direction is a direction orthogonal to the main surface **101** and directions parallel to the main surface **101** are lateral directions. The alignment plugs **250** may consist of one single material. According to other embodiments, the alignment plugs **250** include layers of more than one material.

The auxiliary materials may be any materials against which the semiconductor oxide can be removed with high selectivity. For example, the at least one auxiliary material is silicon nitride, carbon, amorphous silicon or doped or undoped polycrystalline silicon. The alignment plugs **250** may have a homogeneous structure provided from one single auxiliary material or may include a structure of two or more different auxiliary materials, for example a layered structure

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including layers of deposited semiconductor oxides, semiconductor oxynitrides, semiconductor nitrides, undoped silicon glass or doped silicon glasses.

The semiconductor oxide pillars **202** are removed, for example by using a wet etch process at 800 degree Celsius which is selective against the auxiliary materials and the semiconductor material of the semiconductor layer **100a**. A conformal spacer layer may be deposited having a thickness less than half of the width of the semiconductor mesas **192**. The conformal spacer layer may include a deposited semiconductor oxide, a semiconductor oxynitride, a semiconductor nitride, undoped silicon glass or a doped silicon glass, by way of example. The conformal spacer layer is highly anisotropically etched, for example using an RIE (reactive ion beam etching) to remove horizontal sections selectively against vertical sections.

The resulting contact spacers **305** extending along the sidewalls of the alignment plugs **250** are shown in FIG. **1C**. The sidewalls of the alignment plugs **250** are tilted to the main surface **101**. According to an embodiment, the sidewalls are vertical or approximately vertical with respect to the main surface **101** to support the formation of contact spacers **305**. The material of the contact spacers **305** is etchable with high selectivity against the auxiliary material of the alignment plugs **250** and the semiconductor material of the semiconductor layer **100a**. The alignment plugs **250** and the contact spacers **305** may provide a combined etch mask for introducing contact grooves into exposed sections of the main surface **101** in the center of the end faces **105** of the semiconductor mesas **190**. A highly conductive material may be deposited in the contact grooves and the openings between the contact spacers **305**.

FIG. **2** illustrates a semiconductor device **500** obtained from one of a plurality of identical semiconductor dies processed as a portion of the semiconductor substrate **500a** of FIGS. **1A** to **1C**. The semiconductor device **500** may be a power switching device, e.g. a power IGFET or IGBT. According to the illustrated embodiment the semiconductor device **500** includes subsurface structures **190** extending from a main surface **101** into a semiconductor portion **100** and including dielectric layers **205** dielectrically insulating conductive gate electrodes **150** from a semiconductor portion **100**. The main surface **101** is the original surface of the semiconductor portion **100** after a last epitaxy process for the formation of the semiconductor portion **100** and before a first recess process at least in sections reducing a thickness of the semiconductor portion from the side of the main surface **101**. In the finalized semiconductor device **500** a distance between the main surface **101** and a planar rear side surface **102** is the same in a cell area comprising IGFET cells and in an edge area without IGFET cells and including termination structures.

The semiconductor mesas **192** may include source zones **110** of a first conductivity type directly adjoining the main surface **101** in the semiconductor mesas **192**. The semiconductor mesas **192** further include body zones **115** of a second conductivity type, which is complementary to the first conductivity type. The body zones **115** separate the source zones **110** from a drift zone **120** of the first conductivity type. The dielectric layers **205** may dielectrically couple the gate electrodes **150** with the body zones **115**. According to the illustrated embodiment, the first conductivity type is n-type and the second conductivity type is p-type. Other embodiments may provide p-type as the first and n-type as the second conductivity type.

In the vertical projection of the subsurface structures **190** above the main surface **101** are alignment plugs **250**. Side-

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walls of the alignment plugs **250** are tilted to the main surface **101**, for example perpendicular to the main surface **101**. Contact spacers **305** extend along the sidewalls of the alignment plugs **250**. A first electrode structure **310** provided on the side of the main surface **101** is electrically connected to the source zones **110** and the body zones **115** through contact plugs **315** between neighboring contact spacers **305**.

The drift zone **120** forms a planar interface with a heavily doped drain layer **130** of the same conductivity type. According to an embodiment related to IGFETs, the heavily doped drain layer **130** directly adjoins a second electrode structure **320** at the rear surface **102** opposite to the main surface **101**. According to the illustrated embodiment, which relates to IGBTs, a collector layer **140** of the second conductivity type separates the drain layer **130** and the second electrode **320**.

The contact plugs **315** are formed without an additional lithographic mask such that no alignment errors must be taken into account when defining the minimum distance between neighboring ones of the subsurface structures **190**. The performance of the semiconductor device **500** can be increased by applying carrier confinement techniques striving for further reducing the distance between neighboring ones of the subsurface structures **190** to less than 300 nm, for example to about 200 nm and less.

Other than conventional approaches providing self-aligned contacts to semiconductor mesas by using position information available below a main surface, for example by recessing the semiconductor portion between the subsurface structures, the present embodiments project the position information to above the main surface **101**. As a consequence, the source zones **110** may be formed along the original main surface **101**. Since the upper edge of the source zones **110** is not defined by etch processes that may introduce dimension fluctuations, the present embodiments suffer less from process inhomogeneities than IGFET cells whose semiconductor upper edge is defined by a recess etch. As a consequence, lower device parameter deviations among semiconductor devices **500** obtained from the same wafer or from different wafers can be observed.

FIGS. **3A** to **3G** illustrate a method of manufacturing a semiconductor device, wherein the method exploits different growth rates for semiconductor oxides on bases with different impurity concentrations. FIG. **3A** shows a portion of a semiconductor substrate **500a**, which may be a single crystalline silicon wafer or a silicon-on-insulator wafer, by way of example. The semiconductor substrate **500a** includes a plurality of identical semiconductor dies. Each die includes a semiconductor portion **100a** which is a section of a semiconductor layer that may include one or more epitaxy layers and a base substrate. The semiconductor portion **100a** may contain impurities of a first conductivity type. Gate trenches are introduced into the semiconductor portion **100a** from a main surface **101**. The gate trenches may be regularly spaced stripes. According to other embodiments, the lateral cross-sections of the gate trenches may be circular, oval, elliptic, or rectangular, for example quadratic, with or without rounded corners. A first field dielectric **206** may be thermally grown or deposited and removed from outside the gate trenches and from a first section of the gate trenches directly adjoining the main surface **101** such that the first field dielectric **206** lines a second section of the gate trenches in a distance to the main surface **101**. A field electrode material may be deposited and removed from the first sections of the gate trenches to form field electrodes **160** in the second sections of the gate trenches **190**.

A second field dielectric **207** may be thermally grown or deposited on the field electrodes **160** and on the sidewalls in

the first sections of the gate trenches. A protection layer **106** may be formed on semiconductor mesas **192** between the gate trenches. For example, the protection layer **106** is a semiconductor oxide layer grown on the semiconductor portion **100a** and may have a thickness of about 2 to 10 nm, for example about 5 nm. A sacrificial material **150a** is deposited to fill the first sections of the gate trenches above the second field dielectrics **207**. Portions of the sacrificial material **150a** outside the gate trenches and above the main surface **101** are removed.

According to an embodiment, the removal of the sacrificial material **150a** may be a CMP (chemical mechanical polishing) process planarizing both the semiconductor portion **100s** and the exposed surface of the sacrificial material **150a** such that the upper edge of the sacrificial material **150a** is flush with the main surface **101**. Impurities of the second conductivity type are introduced into semiconductor mesas **192** between the gate trenches through the main surface **101**, for example by an implant which may be masked or unmasked. The impurities of the second conductivity type may be tempered to form a body zone **115** in first sections of the semiconductor mesas **192** adjoining the main surface **101**. A buried edge of the body zones **115** may be approximately adjusted with a buried edge of the sacrificial material **150a**. Impurities of the first conductivity type are implanted through the main surface **101**. The impurities of the first conductivity type locally counter-dope portions of the body zones **115** close to the main surface **101**, wherein implant zones **110a** of the first conductivity type are formed between the main surface **101** and the body zones **115**.

According to an embodiment the first conductivity type is n-type and arsenic As atoms are implanted at a dose of at least 10^{15} cm^{-2} .

FIG. 3A shows the gate trenches forming precursor structures **190a** between the semiconductor mesas **192**. A first field dielectric **206** dielectrically insulates field electrodes **160** in the second sections of the precursor structures **190a** spaced from the main surface **101** from the surrounding semiconductor portion **100a**. A sacrificial material **150a** fills first sections of the precursor structures **190a** between the main surface **101** and a second field dielectric **207** on the field electrodes **160**. The sacrificial material **150a** may be any material which is selectively removable against the second field dielectric **206** and the semiconductor material of the semiconductor portion **100a**, for example amorphous silicon, polycrystalline silicon, or carbon. A vertical dielectric layer **205a** separates the sacrificial material **150a** from the semiconductor portion **100a**. In the semiconductor mesas **192** between the precursor structures **190a**, implant zones **110a** of the first conductivity type directly adjoin the main surface **101**. The body zones **115** of the second conductivity type separate the implant zones **110a** from a drift layer **120**. A protection layer **106** covers at least the semiconductor mesas **192** and may cover the sacrificial material **150a** in the precursor structures **192**.

Due to the flush surface after CMP, no shadowing effects occur during introduction of the impurities such that the implant zones **110a** and the body zone **115** are uniform in the lateral directions. The implant zones **110a** both serve as precursor zones for the source zones **110** and define a basis of strong oxide growth in the vertical direction. The sacrificial material **150a** is removed, for example using a wet etch process, whereby the vertical dielectric **205a** may be partly or completely removed. According to other embodiments, the vertical dielectric layer **205a** is not removed.

FIG. 3B shows the precursor structures **190a** after removal of the sacrificial material **150a** and the vertical dielectric layer **205a**. The first sections of the precursor structures **190a**

between the main surface **101** and the second field dielectric **207** are empty. The protection layer **106** may also be removed either in a separate process or in the course of one of the processes for removing the sacrificial material **150a** and vertical dielectric layer **205a**.

An oxidation process is controlled under process conditions exploiting different growth rates on bases having different impurity concentrations, for example a low temperature wet oxidation process at about 800 degree Celsius, wherein an oxidation rate in the vertical direction on the basis of the heavily doped impurity zone **110a** is about 10 to 30, for example about 20 times the oxidation rate along exposed sections of the sidewall surfaces **104** of the semiconductor mesas **192**.

FIG. 3C shows semiconductor oxide pillars **202** grown in the vertical direction on the semiconductor mesas **192** and vertical semiconductor oxide liners **202b** grown along the exposed portions of the exposed sidewall surfaces **104** of the semiconductor mesas **192** in the first sections of the precursor structures **190**. The height of the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** over the main surface **101** may be between 100 and 300 nm, for example about 200 nm. The thickness of the vertical semiconductor oxide liners **202b** may be between 5 and 20 nm, for example about 10 nm. According to an embodiment, the vertical semiconductor oxide liner **202b** is removed. According to other embodiments, the vertical semiconductor oxide liner **202b** forms a portion of or the complete gate dielectric in a finalized semiconductor device. According to an embodiment, the semiconductor oxide liner **202b** is removed in an HF-b cleaning process and a gate dielectric **205** is formed by thermal growth or by deposition of a dielectric material, for example a silicon oxide formed by providing TEOS (tetraethylorthosilane) as precursor material, alumina Al_2O_3 or other materials known in the art for forming gate dielectrics. One or more conductive materials are deposited and recessed to obtain finalized subsurface structures **190** from the filled precursor structures **190a**.

FIG. 3D shows the gate dielectric **205** formed along the vertical sidewalls of the semiconductor mesas **192** and gate electrodes **150** formed in the first sections of the subsurface structures **190**. A buried edge of the gate electrodes **150** is in substance adjusted to a buried edge of the base zones **115** and may overlap to some degree with the drift zone **120**.

An upper edge of the gate electrodes **205** may be adjusted to the buried edge of source zones emerging from the impurity zones **110a** and may overlap with the source zones to some degree. A cap layer may be formed above the gate electrodes **150**. The cap layer may be a grown or deposited semiconductor oxide layer. According to another embodiment the gate electrodes **150** are flush or approximately flush with the main surface **101** or recessed to a distance to the main surface **101** to at most 150 nm. Avoiding any recess or providing only a very shallow recess of the gate electrodes **150** reduces process-induced fluctuations of device parameters concerning the gate capacities, e.g. the gate-drain Charge Qgd and the gate charge Qg.

The spaces between the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** are filled with at least one auxiliary material, to form alignment plugs **250**. According to the illustrated embodiment, a first auxiliary material is deposited in a conformal manner, wherein the thickness of the first auxiliary material is less than half the width of the spaces between the semiconductor oxide pillars **202**. The semiconductor oxide pillars **202** are selectively removable against the first auxiliary material. A spacer etch is performed to remove horizontal portions of the deposited first auxiliary material above the semiconductor oxide pillars **202**, the semiconductor mesas **192** and the gate elec-

trode **150**. The remaining portions of the first auxiliary material form gate contact spacers **252** along sidewalls of the semiconductor oxide pillars **202**. A second auxiliary material, which may be selectively removable against the first auxiliary material, may be deposited, may fill the remaining space between the gate contact spacers **252**, and may form place holder structures **254** above the gate electrodes **150**. The first auxiliary material may be a oxynitride or nitride film with a uniform thickness in a range from 35 nm to 65 nm, for example about 50 nm.

FIG. 3E shows both the gate contact spacers **252** extending along vertical sidewalls of the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** and the place holder structures **254** above the gate electrodes **150**. The gate contact spacers **252** may have a thickness from 35 nm to 65 nm, for example about 50 nm. The place holder structures **254** may be provided from amorphous silicon, polycrystalline silicon, or carbon, by way of example. The place holder structures **254** and the gate contact spacers **252** in combination form alignment plugs **250**.

The semiconductor oxide pillars **202** are removed. The removal of the semiconductor oxide pillars **202** may be combined with the removal of the place holder structures **254**, wherein the removal of the place holder structures **254** may include an in-situ carbon ash. According to other embodiments, the place holder structures **254** are maintained.

A conformal spacer layer, which may include one single layer from the same material or two or more layers of different materials is deposited, wherein the spacer layer may completely fill the space between opposing gates contact spacers **252** above the gate electrodes **150** but does not fill the spaces above the semiconductor mesas **192**. According to an embodiment the spacer layer includes a first dielectric layer **231**, for example a silicon oxide layer resulting from a process using TEOS as a precursor material, and a second dielectric layer **232**, which may be a silicate glass, for example BSG (boron silicate glass), (PSG phosphorus silicate glass), BPSG (boron phosphorus silicate glass) or undoped silicate glass. According to an embodiment, the first dielectric layer **231** may be a TEOS layer with a uniform thickness in a range from 15 nm and 25 nm, for example about 20 nm, and the second dielectric layer **232** may be a BPSG layer with a uniform thickness in a range from 40 nm to 60 nm, for example about 50 nm. An RTP (rapid thermal process) may anneal the implant zones **110a** to generate source zones **110** without allowing a reflow of the spacer layer.

A spacer etch is performed to remove horizontal portions of the spacer layer above the alignment plugs **250** and the semiconductor mesas **192** to form contact spacers **305** along sidewalls of the alignment plugs **250**, for example along the gate contact spacers **252**.

FIG. 3F shows the contact spacers **305** exposing the main surface **101** in contact areas which are self-aligned to the edges of the subsurface structures **190**. The contact spacers **305** may be used as an etch mask to etch contact grooves into the semiconductor mesas **192**. Through the bottom of the contact grooves impurities of the second conductivity type may be implanted to form contact zones **117**. A further tempering may smooth and round the exposed upper edges of the contact spacers **305**. Metal may be deposited to form contact plugs **315** and a first electrode structure **310** electrically connected to the source zones **110** and the body zones **115** through the contact plugs **315** and the contact zones **117** as shown in FIG. 3G.

FIG. 4A shows a semiconductor device **500** with a semiconductor portion **100** having a main surface **101** and a rear surface **102** parallel to the main surface **101**. The semiconductor portion **100** is provided from a single-crystal semicon-

ductor material, for example silicon Si, silicon carbide SiC, germanium Ge, a silicon germanium crystal SiGe, gallium nitride GaN or gallium arsenide GaAs. A distance between the first and second surfaces **101**, **102** depends typically on the breakdown voltage for which the semiconductor device **500** is specified and is at least 40 μm , for example at least 175 μm . The semiconductor portion **100** may have a rectangular shape with an edge length in the range of several mm or a circular shape with a diameter of several mm. The normal to the main and rear surfaces **101**, **102** defines a vertical direction and directions orthogonal to the normal direction are lateral directions.

The semiconductor portion **100** may include an impurity layer **130** of a first conductivity type. The impurity layer **130** may extend along a complete cross-sectional plane of the semiconductor portion **100** parallel to the rear surface **102**. In case the semiconductor device **500** is an IGFET (insulated gate field effect transistor), the impurity layer **130** directly adjoins the rear surface **102** and the mean net impurity concentration in the impurity layer **130** is comparatively high, e.g. at least $5 \times 10^{18} \text{ cm}^{-3}$. In case the semiconductor device **500** is an IGBT (insulated gate bipolar transistor), a collector layer of the second conductivity type which is the opposite of the first conductivity type is arranged between the impurity layer **130** and the rear surface **102**, wherein the mean net impurity concentration in the impurity layer **130** may be between 5×10^{12} and $5 \times 10^{16} \text{ cm}^{-3}$, by way of example.

The semiconductor portion **100** further includes a drift layer **120** of the first conductivity type between the main surface **101** and the impurity layer **130**, wherein a mean net impurity concentration in the drift layer **120** is at most a tenth of the mean net impurity concentration in the impurity layer **130**.

Subsurface structures **190** extend from the main surface **101** into the drift layer **120**. The width of the subsurface structures **190** may be between 100 nm and 300 nm, e.g. about 200 nm. The subsurface structures **190** include field electrodes **160** and gate electrodes **150** of a conductive material, respectively, for example polycrystalline silicon. A first field dielectric **206** may dielectrically insulate the field electrodes **160** from the surrounding semiconductor material of the semiconductor portion **100** and a second field dielectric **207** may dielectrically separate the field and gate electrodes **170**, **150** from each other. Gate dielectrics **205** dielectrically couple the gate electrodes **150** with body zones **115** of the second conductivity type, which are formed in semiconductor mesas between the subsurface structures **190**. The body zones **115** form first pn junctions with source zones **110** directly adjoining the main surface **101** and second pn junctions with the drift layer **120**. A width of the semiconductor mesas may be between 150 nm and 250 nm, e.g. about 180 nm. A pitch, i.e. a center-to-center distance, of the semiconductor mesas may be between 350 nm and 450 nm, e.g. 400 nm. Above the subsurface structures **190** dielectric alignment plugs **250** may be formed from one or more dielectric materials. According to the illustrated embodiment, the alignment plugs **250** include gate contact spacers **252**, wherein the outer edges of the gate contact spacers **252** are in substance aligned with outer edges of the subsurface structures **190** or the gate electrodes **150**. A width of the gate contact spacers **252** may be between 30 nm and 80 nm, e.g. about 50 nm. Along sidewalls of the gate contact spacers **252** oriented to the semiconductor mesas contact spacers **305** are formed above source zones **110** having the same conductivity type as the drift layer **120**. The alignment plugs **250** above the gate electrodes **150** may include a dielectric fill **256** having the same construction as the contact spacers **305**.

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At the side of the main surface **101**, a first electrode structure **310**, which may be electrically coupled or connected to a source terminal in case the semiconductor device **500** is an IGBT or to an emitter terminal in case the semiconductor device **500** is an IGBT, is provided above a dielectric structure including the alignment plugs **250** and the contact spacers **305**. Contact plugs **315** extend between opposing contact spacers **305** from the first electrode structure **310** to the semiconductor portion **100**. The contact plugs **315** may have a width of 50 nm to 70 nm, e.g. about 60 nm, may extend into the semiconductor portion **100** and electrically contact the source zones **110** and, through heavily doped contact zones **117**, the body zones **115**.

A second field electrode structure **320** directly adjoins the rear surface **102** of the semiconductor portion **100**. According to embodiments related to super junction IGBTs, the second electrode structure **320** directly adjoins the impurity layer **130**. According to embodiments related to IGBTs, a collector layer of the second conductivity type is formed between the impurity layer **130** and the second electrode structure **320**.

Each of the first and second electrode structures **310**, **320** and the contact plugs **315** may consist of or contain, as main constituent(s) aluminum Al, copper Cu, or alloys of aluminum or copper, for example AlSi, AlCu or AlSiCu. According to other embodiments, one or both of the first and second electrode structures **310**, **320** or the contact plugs **315** may contain one or more layers having nickel Ni, titanium Ti, silver Ag, gold Au, platinum Pt, tungsten W and/or palladium Pd as main constituent(s). For example, at least one of the first and second electrode structures **310**, **320** includes two or more sub layers, at least one of the sub layers containing one or more of Ni, Ti, Ta, Ag, Au, Pt, W and Pd as main constituent(s), or silicides and/or alloys therefrom.

FIG. 4B shows gate contacts **317** extending between adjacent ones of the gate contact spacers **252** through the dielectric structure to the gate electrodes **150**. The gate contact spacers **252** ensure a minimum distance between the gate contacts **317** on the one hand and gate dielectric **205** and the semiconductor mesas **192** on the other hand, such that the alignment requirements for a lithographic mask providing openings in the alignment plugs **250** for the formation of the

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gate contacts **317** is relaxed. According to other embodiments, the formation of the gate contacts **317** may follow a removal of the place holder structures **254** (see FIG. 3E).

Although specific embodiments have been illustrated and described herein, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that a variety of alternate and/or equivalent implementations may be substituted for the specific embodiments shown and described without departing from the scope of the present invention. This application is intended to cover any adaptations or variations of the specific embodiments discussed herein. Therefore, it is intended that this invention be limited only by the claims and the equivalents thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. A semiconductor device, comprising:

subsurface structures extending from a main surface into a semiconductor portion, each subsurface structure comprising a gate electrode dielectrically insulated from the semiconductor portion;

alignment plugs in a vertical projection of the subsurface structures;

contact spacers extending along sidewalls of the alignment plugs tilted to the main surface; and

contact plugs directly adjoining semiconductor mesas between the subsurface structures, the contact plugs provided between opposing ones of the contact spacers;

wherein the alignment plugs comprise (i) gate contact spacers of a first auxiliary material along sidewalls of the contact spacer opposite to the contact plugs and (ii) gate contacts between the gate contact spacers assigned to a respective subsurface structure.

2. The semiconductor device of claim 1, further comprising:

source zones of a first conductivity type in the semiconductor mesas directly adjoining the main surface.

3. The semiconductor device of claim 1, further comprising:

body zones of a complementary second conductivity type in the semiconductor mesas, the body zones forming first pn junctions with the source zones and second pn junctions with a drift layer of the first conductivity type.

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